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THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH TO GOD.

By the Rev. F. W. DILLISTONE, B.D.,

Vicar of St. Andrew's, Oxford.

I HAVE been called to undertake to-night a great responsibility—to speak of “The Responsibility of the Church to God.” Who am I that I should do such a thing? A tiny member of the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church of God—to speak in God’s Name to the Church and remind her of her calling in relation to Him! How could I dare to undertake such a thing were it not that God has spoken, God has uttered His voice, and it is open even to the least and humblest member of His Church to listen and to hear. I may not have heard aright—how loud is the din of the world in our ears to-day—how loud is the clamour of our own sinful hearts. Yet that which we have heard declare we unto you. When you have made all allowances for human mistakes and fallibilities, still out of what I am to say you may catch some echo of the authentic voice of God.

Without any further introduction I will say at once that the Church’s first responsibility is to face firmly and squarely the situation in which she finds herself at this present moment—in other words, to come to grips with moral realities. Ever and anon, whether in Old Testament or New Testament or history, the Church of God has refused to do this. She finds herself set in the midst of a world-order with which she would fain come to terms. The world’s life intrigues her, the world’s standards of success attract her, the world’s objectives fascinate her, the world’s values allure her. So much there is that seems so fair that to decry would seem rude and boorish; so much there is that seems so permanent and enduring that to attack would seem foolish and disastrous; surely human ideals and objectives are only another name for the Divine. So she emphasizes the good and overlooks the ill, finds a way of compromise and welcomes conditions of peace. Peace, peace, she says, when there is no peace; for the Lord’s controversy is ever existent and there is no compromise between holiness and sin.

I might go to history and set out one case after another of that which I have just described in general terms. Again and again the message of the prophet to the Church of his day has been just this—Face moral realities. Recognize the sin of the world. Behold a world estranged from God, opposed to God, strong in its own self-sufficiency, following idols. Face it—and then act. And time and again the Church of the day has refused the challenge, has driven the prophet into the wilderness and only through disaster and brutality at the hands of the world-power, has begun to realize the truth of what the prophet said.

So I plead as the first responsibility of the Church at this moment that she should face squarely the pressure of the world-situation. I need not elaborate it. The facts are so well known. Yet their very seriousness seems to act as a narcotic upon us. The world is on the brink of war—war such as we cannot imagine. All human astuteness and ingenuity is being employed to avert the tragedy; the fate of our Western civilization hangs in the balance. In a considered pamphlet just published—a pamphlet of no alarmist kind—there occurs this statement, “At any moment the international tension may prove insupportable, and another World War shatter western civilization.” That is one fact. Again the world is floundering in a moral abyss. Old standards have gone and no new universally applicable standards are taking their place. Racial pride, prejudice and antagonism march unashamedly abroad; lust for power stops at nothing to accomplish its ends; and even in our own country according to the recent pronouncement of Lord Salisbury, “Fraud is rampant and on the largest scale and dishonesty is so common as to be hardly noticed. As to any standard of sexual morality, it has almost ceased to attract attention.” The utter moral relativity in the world is a second fact. But again, and perhaps worst of all, the world is fast slipping back into a state of absolute idolatry. The cry has gone forth, “Up make us gods to go before us” and even the Church has become involved in the apostasy from the living God. The decay of old religions is recognized on all hands—a decay from which at least the outward form of Christianity has not been exempt. As was said in a recent address at Newcastle by a leader of youth, “I certainly think that there is no disputing the common assertion that this is the end of the Christian era in the sense that Christianity has ceased to be a strong influence in the modern state or a vital interest to the majority of individuals. Europe as a whole has stopped even pretending to be Christian.” But it is perhaps not so generally recognized how marked has been the recrudescence of idolatry. As this same voice went on to say, “This is not an age of scepticism—it is scarcely intelligent enough for that—but of extraordinary faith in extraordinary things.” The apparent liberators and benefactors of mankind—be they men, materials, programmes, or ideas—have been idolized, even deified and men have bowed the knee in worship and submission. The spiritual temperature of the world has fallen so low that out of the pervading atmosphere of secularism there has come into being frozen crystallized idols which are now the gods of humanity. That is a third fact—the re-establishment on all hands of the worship of idols.

There are some facts. But they are more than facts—they are symptoms of something far deeper. They are blatant symptoms of that great revolt of the self-conscious and self-justified individual against the living God*—that revolt which in old and simple terms is the Sin of the World. That revolt has been going on continuously throughout the long centuries. It is comparable to that inward burning and rumbling hidden beneath this so fair earth; only at the time of an earthquake or a volcanic eruption do we realize its strength and

*A phrase taken from a recent manifesto of the German Confessional Church.

intensity. And it requires a volcanic Man of the stature of a Pharaoh or a Nebuchadnezzar, or an Antiochus Epiphanes or a Nero, or an Innocent IV, or a Mussolini, to make us realize the strength of this revolt of the self-justified individual against the living God. The Sin of the World! Monarchies, democracies, dictatorships; ideologies, idolatries, culture, so-called new moralities—one and all are symptoms of this one underlying, all too terrible reality—the Sin of the World.

Of course it is perfectly possible to interpret the facts in other ways, to say that these are merely passing phases, that we mustn't take things too seriously, that things will right themselves in time. It is all too possible for the Church to say that they are symptoms of a temporary malady rather than of a deadly disease—and to apply mild palliatives accordingly. If anyone feels that is the right way then I have nothing more to say. But I am convinced that it is not God's way and that it is not the Church's way if she is to be true to her Lord and Master. Rather under the pressure of the terrific challenge of these facts, there comes the call to do something crucial, climacteric. The second immediate responsibility of the Church, I hold, after facing squarely the terrible moral realities of the present situation, the Sin of the World, is deliberately, purposefully to *Withdraw*—to withdraw and stand before the Judgement-Seat of God.

That is the call which I long to hear at this present juncture. We are being surrounded by recalls of one kind and another. There is a spate of jubilees, centenaries, and so on, in which the effort is made to recall something of the spirit of 50 or 100 years ago. There are recalls to old orthodoxies, old formularies, old rituals. There is—and I speak guardedly, for none, I think, admires more than I do the lead which the Archbishop is giving in spiritual things—there is what is called a recall to religion. I am sorry that title has been given. There is plenty of religion in the world to-day just as there was in the world to which Christ came. Of that world it has been said that there was room for any number of religions, but there was no room for God or for faith in God. So to-day there is plenty of religion and plenty of interest in religion but small place for the living God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So I long to hear not a recall of the world to religion but a recall of the Church to God, the living God of revelation, the One true God, over all, blessed for ever. The Church's second responsibility is to withdraw to meet her God.

But now let us note, to withdraw will not be easy. We are too deeply immersed in the world-stream. We have compromised, we have joined hands with the world, we have shared in the world's life to such an extent that withdrawal becomes comparable to the cutting off of a hand or a foot. We have become so keen on our busy-nesses, our activities, our schemes, our programmes, that to withdraw will be as costly as the shedding of our very life-blood. Yet only by something as serious as that, shall we make any creative contribution to the present world-situation; our Lord said that times come to men when they must either sever a hand or a foot or go out into outer darkness.

But supposing the Church were willing—that a great wave of revulsion set in and the Church went out again to the wilderness, the Alone, to meet with her God, what then? What is her responsibility then? As I conceive it, it will again be no genial, no easy thing. The Church must withdraw primarily to stand under the judgement of the Word of God. It is instructive in this connection, I think, to compare for a moment the record of the Temptations of our Lord. He withdrew to the Wilderness there to stand under the judgement of the Word of God. In His case the judgement had in it nothing of condemnation; He was not implicated and involved in the Sin of the World; He willingly accepted the judgement and declared that the Word of God to Him was holy and good and true. The Devil sought to entice Him away from the judgement of the Word to the judgement of humanism and idolatry—but all in vain. But when the Church thus comes under the judgement of the Word of God it is a very different story. To Him it was external suggestion; with us it has been inward reality. We are all too deeply involved in that revolt of the self-justified individual against the living God which is the Sin of the World. We have caught the infection of the world, we have justified ourselves in God's sight. We have tried to feed the world with the bread of our little human palliatives—our human ideals and cultures and ethics, and there has been a famine of the Word of God. We have staged dramatic scenes in the temple-courts, our man-made schemes of evangelism and religious education and ritual innovation—and the world has waited in vain for the true witness to the reality of God. We have bowed down before the idols of the world—human systems, worldly honours, material comforts—and that only unifying loyalty, the worship of the living God, has so rarely been revealed.

For the last fifty years we have been living in an atmosphere of stifling humanism and the poison has penetrated to the very heart of the Church. The world has been self-confident and optimistic; we have been the same. The world has trusted to reason, arbitration, education, to bring inevitable progress; we have followed suit. Time and again we have sought enlightenment, rather than the Light, sympathetic accommodation rather than holy demand, the world rather than God. We have tried all human means and have failed. We stand in the crisis under the judgement of the Word of God. And the call comes to humiliation and confession, to the acknowledgment that we, the Church of God, have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Surely then this is the second responsibility of the Church—to withdraw and stand under the judgement of the Word of God; to humble herself, to listen again to God's voice, to seek after that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. The only Church which is going to do anything in the world to-day is Holy Church—Church, that is, withdrawn, humbled, purified, judged, Church stripped of her self-reliance and self-justification, and dependent alone upon God and the Word of His Grace.

The final responsibility of the Church towards God, as it seems to me, is twofold. It is to bear witness to the Word before God in soul-

travailing prayer ; it is then to return to the world, to bear witness to the Word before the world, in self-denying utterance. Of this latter we shall hear much more to-morrow. I would only venture to say that the core of the Church's responsibility to God in this matter, is that the Word to which she bears witness must be the Word to which she owes her very existence—the Word of His Cross, the Word of Holy Grace, the Word of God's mercy to sinful man, the Word that breaks all human idolatries and in judging man, saves him. "I came not to call the self-justified but sinners." If she confesses that Word, she will not be popular though she will incidentally recover the world's respect. The world hates to be rebuked, as witness a certain broadcast utterance by the Archbishop near the end of last year ; but the world knows when the word comes from God and though it may resist even to the point of crucifying the Church that brings the Word, yet even out of such a death more will come to the world than can ever come from soft human utterances or shallow words of approval. The Church must bear witness to the Word of God in humble, self-denying utterance.

But equally, nay more so, the Church is called to bear witness to the Word before God, in deep, soul-travailing prayer. The motive-spring of her prayer, let us note, is not primarily the pain and sorrow of the world, loath as I would be to minimize the sadness and pathos of that. But somehow, although we are so well acquainted with that to-day, it is failing to stir us to any urgent searching prayer. Perhaps it would be true to say that never has our knowledge of humanity's ills been so extensive as it is to-day, yet rarely has the prayer-life of the Church been so weak. Why ? Is it not because our prayer no longer has the character of urgent response to the living, revealing Word of God. We have elaborate litanies and liturgies and forms of intercession—all good and valuable. But they lack power and reality unless they serve as the true witness of the Church before God to the Word she has heard Him speak. And whatever may be the case for the world at large, for the Church there is one Word by which she was created and in which she must ever live and move and have her being—it is the Word of the Cross. Apart from that Word, the Church is a mere religious club, a superfluity. On that Word she ever depends. And as she listens afresh to that Word, she hears the very heart-beat of God ; she hears the clash of the dread conflict between holiness and sin ; she beholds the Lamb of God which taketh away the Sin of the World. And she worships and confesses ; she brings herself to the Cross, she brings the world to the Cross, she joins in the travail of the ages, she becomes crucified with Christ, she makes intercession for the transgressors. She looks at herself and cries, "God be merciful to me a sinner" ; she looks at the world and cries, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" ; she looks at her Lord and with those about the throne she cries :

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive the Power and the Riches and the Wisdom and the Strength and the Honour and the Glory and the Blessing—yes, for ever and ever.—Amen."